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# Looking in the Fridge for Feelings

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## **‘LOOKING IN THE FRIDGE FOR FEELINGS’**

The title of my paper, ‘Looking in the Fridge for Feelings’, is from a video describing feminist therapeutic work with women who have eating disorders. While not every woman – or man – develops an eating disorder, food does have emotional and gendered significance for many. How has consumer culture been able to exploit this significance such that it becomes necessary to ‘look in the fridge for one’s feelings’? In this paper I draw on a combination of feminist psychoanalytic and postmodern thinking to understand the complex and gendered way in which consumerism is able to exploit women’s gendered psychodynamics through their participation in the disciplinary practices of femininity. I use an example from my clinical research work with women who have eating problems. In this work I explored the tensions and contradictions in and between aspects of feminism, psychoanalytic object relations theory and postmodern thinking. However, first I want to outline why food is such an emotive subject.

Given that the sensation of hunger ‘is one of the most basic and discrete avenues by which need is learned about altogether’ (Bloom and Kogel 1994:41), it is perhaps no surprise that food and feeding have such key functions in psychophysical development. Drawing on ideas from Winnicott’s attachment theory, Bloom et al (Bloom, Gitter, Gutwill, Kogel, Zaphiropoulos, 1994) from the Women’s Therapy Institute in New York suggest that food’s material and symbolic connection with the infant’s primary caretaker makes it a key transitional object in development and one that continues to play a significant role throughout life. From Winnicott’s perspective, part of the developmental process of separation and individuation involves the infant making use of ‘transitional objects’ into which their feelings (mainly) about the other can be projected so that the object kept near when the caretaker is not present. With

increased separation, the infant's lessening sense of omnipotent control is compensated for by their increasing sense of achievement, gained through both improved physical mobility and verbal capacity. As well, they have the emotional pleasure of a clearer sense that a separate other also partakes in assuaging needs. The infant's ability to both get an accurate response from its caretaker to its demands for feeding, as well as its increasing ability to feed itself, both mark points of accomplishment within psychophysical and emotional development. In addition, the infant's expression of a wish for a particular food, or for instance, rejecting those it doesn't want, is indicative of their growing autonomy, representing attempts to establish a sense of self distinct from others, as well as a more finely tuned expression of desire.

However, development in contemporary western society is a gendered process taking place in specific circumstances in which food consumption and body size hold a great deal of significance. Bloom and Kogel (1994b) note that part of consolidating gender identity involves an early stage in which children seem to want to display and use their bodies, as if to have their sense of corporealism not just confirmed but admired. For girls however, rather than this being a phase, 'a little girl's mandate to appear (rather than to act or be) and to focus on her appearance is confirmed as intrinsic to her being and equal to being an adequate female' (p.49) (my emphasis). The authors maintain that 'to some degree, for all women, the critical work of separation, differentiation, and integrating sexuality are displaced on to a struggle to manage one's appetite for food and to transform one's body' (1994b:53).

While Bloom and her co-authors (1994) draw on aspects of Winnicott's work to theorise the significance of food and feeding, they see it as necessary to broaden the locus of attachment beyond the mother. They contend that public culture is part of

the 'relational matrix', a form of "maternal" matrix to which individuals consciously and unconsciously attach' (p.xiii). Dominant cultural symbols are embodied in consumer objects that don't simply allow attachment, but actively encourage this through possession. Active participation in and attachment to consumer culture resonates with individual's developing psychological structures, thereby allowing public culture to function as 'another facilitating environment for intrapsychic life and for people to feel interpersonally connected' (Gutwill 1994a:18). Consumer culture provides the right combination of the authority and nurturance of parental roles, through prescribing what is right and encouraging consumers to look after themselves by 'getting the best'.

However, Gutwill suggests the 'subject seeking' nature of consumerism is toxic in contrast to Winnicott's notion of culture as a benign transitional space (1994a p.21). She contends that by using the psychodynamics of choice and transformation to tap into individual desires, consumerism functions to bridge the gap between the public and the private. Indeed, the emotional and economic power of consumerism is that its cultural symbols, whether they be food, clothing or a piece of equipment, seem to 'know' not just what the consumer wants, but what she or he needs. Further, the consumer item appears able to satisfy those wants and needs.

And these culturally and emotionally symbolic meanings attached to objects which accounts for how mass culture is actively introjected and attached to through the personal reproduction of culturally determined 'ways of being'. Moreover, these transitional objects are imbued with culturally specified notions of masculinity and femininity. In contemporary western culture, 'looking good' is equated with 'being right'. For girls, looking good and being right are equated with having the right body size and shape (Bloom et al 1994).

Of course, it is women's bodies which have become vehicles for expressing and negotiating aspects of consumerism. Consumerism appeals to women's gender-specific sense of agency; that is, a belief in the importance of 'acting upon themselves' and 'making things right for others'. By making women's bodies an integral part of consumerism, consumerism breaches the public/private split in quite complex ways. It offers women the means to attach to the world outside the home, but through setting up a 'hall of mirrors' in which women constantly see other women (or is it themselves?) mirrored back to them. These 'ideal' (and changing) mirrors, while seeming to reflect themselves as they are now, hold out endless possibilities (choices?) of who they might become. Or who they should be?

Orbach (1978) proposed that these false 'choices' feed into and exacerbate women's underlying sense of body insecurity. Through constantly 'viewing' their bodies, women may not feel they 'own' them. She suggested that when they look into the mirror, women tend to focus on hated aspects of the body, fantasising about how they would look if they lost weight, or exercised more. As the mirrors of consumerism are both authoritative and nurturing, they can appear to be Winnicottian mirrors, promising containment and fulfilment of desire (Bloom et al 1994). Yet consumer mirrors also de-centre the viewer, constructing a sense of subjectivity through a false belief in agency. While appearing to offer the means to make fantasy reality, they also manipulate fantasy at an unconscious level, thereby ensuring that desire is socially constructed. This notion of 'mirroring' as misrecognition, is derived from Lacan's postmodern psychoanalytic theory (see Frosh 1987).

Feminist interpretations of Foucault's concept of 'panopticons' (1978) – such as those by Bartky and Bordo – elaborate further how internal gendered mirrors function. As Bartky puts it: 'In contemporary patriarchal culture, a panoptical male

connoisseur resides within the consciousness of most women: they stand perpetually before his gaze and under his judgement' (1988:72). The insidiousness of modern discipline is that it provides the means for a sense of accomplishment, of being in control, of identity – after all, the experience of subjectivity is dependent on not just what one knows, but 'knowing what to do' (Ibid p.77).

One way consumer culture offers women the means to 'know what to do' is through dieting. And, '[d]ieting is big business, a business that thrives on failure' (Gutwill 1994b:32). But failure comes to be regarded as the fault of the woman. This allows consumer culture to not only pathologise the woman, but to provide further means to ensure she redeems herself - through another diet - while simultaneously providing the woman with the tools to maintain her gendered sense of self through further transformation.

Bloom et al (1994) argue that dieting has become so insidious and tenacious because it both tantalises and seduces, whilst threatening isolation and rejection should the consumer not respond. The symbolic happiness which the diet represents is sought out. At the same time, the underlying threatening aspects of the failure to diet acts as a punishment. This continual 'seduction and rejection' of consumer culture as exemplified by dieting, fits particularly well with women's gendered psychological structures as explicated by Fairbairn's psychoanalytic object relations theory.

Fairbairn believed that people only internalise 'bad' objects; that is, those linked with unhappy feelings. This results in an internal sense of persecution, experienced as an 'internal saboteur'. He suggests that this occurs as a result of the infant's attempts to retain a sense of omnipotent control of the (m)other because of its dependency on her. Internalising only the 'bad' and experiencing this as part of

the self, enables the infant to retain some kind of attachment to the real (m)other in the face of this environmental disappointment. By blaming the self and not the other (Fairbairn calls this the 'moral defence') the attempt to turn the self into whatever the internalised bad object (the persecutory superego) suggests (symbolically) is required. This defence mechanism thus allows for hope of future assuagement through transforming the self, while preserving the other (and self) from the disturbing feelings which have arisen (see Greenberg and Mitchell 1983 for a fuller account of this). The dynamic nature of unconscious processes mean that internalised representations continue to be acted upon, and themselves act upon other aspects of the ego structure.

Eichenbaum and Orbach (1982) used Fairbairn's ideas to describe the gendered psychophysical dynamics of women's subjectivities as constructed within consumerism. While women may know 'what to do', they may not know 'who they are'. They argued that continually curbing women's needs leads to the construction of numerous internal 'false' boundaries which keep shameful, uncomfortable, forbidden aspects of self separate from each other. This splitting can extend to constructing a false boundary between emotions and bodily experiences, such as hunger, or even between different parts of the body (see Dana 1987).

Alongside the diet industry promoting self-restraint is an even bigger food industry which encapsulates the endless possibilities of consumers having 'choice' through variety and availability. Because food has so many emotional connotations, connected with nurturance, Gutwill (1994a) suggests that this enables advertisers to play on peoples' fears of deprivation and frustration, as they are so bound up with access to food. Again, this finds a market in women's sense of psychophysical deprivation. The food industry has even been able to negotiate a variety of positions

of morality by promoting 'healthy' food as the 'best option', whilst 'recognising' that it isn't possible to maintain constant constraint. Therefore, 'junk' food is made available, so that consumers can 'indulge' themselves, as they so rightly deserve to do, when they work so hard at 'being good'.

Orbach (1978) suggested that, as women are not supposed to have either an emotional or physical 'appetites', they may feel anxious and frightened when their emotional needs are stirred up, quickly 'translating' these nebulous - or even definite - feelings, into feeling hungry. They then admonish and constrain themselves, often in the guise of feeling 'greedy', then fat, then ugly, and then in need of losing weight. Undertaking to eat less, they are put in touch very acutely with material physical hunger, on top of the emotional hunger they already experience from being positioned as the 'emotional nurturer' to others. By removing food, they may be removing one of the few things which they feel does offer them some comfort and satisfaction, something which makes no demands upon them, something which, when they are left alone with the children and the housework, they can have all for themselves.

However, in the following extract we can see that food as a 'subject seeking' consumer object, is imbued with gendered demands. This quote is from a woman I am calling Lyndsay and it occurs in a feminist therapy group for women with eating problems which I ran as part of my reflexive research project. Lyndsay – an anorexic woman - describes a very typical daily struggle with food. She says:

**Lyndsay:**/Cause I've sat there and thought, 'I am not going to give in. I am not going to go down to the biscuit tin', so I've made myself a drink and I've sat there and I have visions of the biscuit tin and what's in it and the longer I leave it, the stronger



the urge gets. It's as if the biscuit tin's shouting, 'What about me?'/

While there are many ways in which this very brief but very rich piece of text could be explored and understood, here I want to use it strategically to illustrate how it enacts the theoretical material I have been outlining. As Lyndsay's therapist it seems clear to me that when she hears a biscuit tin shouting 'What about me?', she is responding to her split off needs which she has projected onto the biscuits. As a feminist I understand that, like the biscuits, Lyndsay must keep her needs encased – perhaps within a tin? – in order to 'keep fresh', to respond to the endless demands of her heterosexual subjectivity. She experiences both her emotional and physical needs as greed and thus to be denied.

Viewed through a postmodern lens, we can understand how Lyndsay seeks salvation through gendered means – using the label 'fat' to transform her dissatisfaction with her life into a gross distortion of her emaciated body size. In turn, she uses the euphemism of dieting to describe her ongoing self-starvation. Lyndsay's gendered sense of persecution not only arises from within but also comes in the form of the 'subject seeking' biscuits, shouting 'What about me!?!'. Despite the fact that she has been a good housewife and mother, she cannot enjoy the tainted reward of the junk food. It has been purchased by her for the men in the family who also shout (seemingly continually) 'What about me!?!'.

It is clear that consumer culture contributes to the breeding of body insecurity in women by playing on and exacerbating women's gendered, corporeal sense of agency through promising self-transformation both by eating particular foods, as well as by not eating at all (Gutwill, 1994a). Moreover, this provides a culturally sanctioned forum in which women's sense of agency is continually directed towards

transforming themselves, yet in a way which literally eats at their psychophysical boundaries. The eating disordered woman has ready access to language and a culture which facilitates this representation and understands the need for control, enabling her to translate her uncertainty or fears about her psychic life, into bodily concerns. Not only does she have an 'internal saboteur' (Bloom, Kogel and Zaphiropoulos 1994b:113), who berates her for being a failure, but she lives in a society which has its own socially structured misogynist defence mechanisms (Menzies 1960) to deal with its fear of women's bodies.

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